Early action can avert Sahel food and nutrition crisis – UN expert

GENEVA – “Drought, poor harvests and rising food prices have left the Sahel region of West-Central Africa on the brink of a humanitarian crisis,” warned Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. “We must not wait until people are starving in order to act. The world must respond immediately to avert a full-scale food and nutrition crisis.

“This crisis may look like a natural calamity, but it is in fact a symptom of our failure to be better prepared and to react more swiftly to early warning signs. The failure of the international community to act, now and in the future, would result in major violations of the right to food.”

Countries affected so far are Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Concerns also extend to Burkina Faso and Senegal, where Governments are still assessing the situation, and to northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. Most of the Governments have declared a state of emergency and requested international assistance.

Six million people in Niger, 2.9 million in Mali, and 700,000 in Mauritania live in the regions affected. Low outputs and high prices are causes for serious concern in these countries, where the link between food insecurity and malnutrition is very strong. In Chad and Mauritania, there is a grain deficit of more than 50 per cent compared to last year. Due to their greater nutritional needs, children face the highest risk of mortality linked to malnutrition, followed by pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls. Global acute malnutrition is already at alarming levels in many areas and will continue to rise.

“The warning signs are all there,” De Schutter said. “We are in the immediate post-harvest period, when prices should drop significantly. But in some cases they continue to rise, and in others they are stabilizing well above the five-year average. In Niger, millet prices were 37 per cent higher in November 2011 than a year earlier, and other key cereals are up to 40 per cent higher than the regional five year average.”

“The lean season will come earlier and last longer than usual. This will leave the Sahel hugely reliant on food imports, which will have to be acquired at sky-high prices on international markets. This could spell disaster for the millions of people whose food needs will rise as their purchasing power plummets.”
Although he deplored the slow reaction of the authorities in Burkina Faso and Senegal, the Special Rapporteur applauded the rapid moves by most Governments in the Sahel region to declare an emergency, and called on the international community to show equal urgency. “We have the technology to predict food shortages accurately, and we have learned some lessons from previous crises. Now we need the international response. The world must not make the same mistakes it did in delaying its response to last year’s crisis in the Horn of Africa*. We have a chance, and a duty, to save lives.”

De Schutter underlined that short-term emergency assistance must be combined with sustained actions to tackle the underlying causes of famine across Africa and the developing world. “In the short term, cash support is needed. The international community must also ensure that emergency food reserves are pre-positioned in risk-prone regions, so that where local purchases are not possible, humanitarian agencies have access to food stocks below the market rate. We must also invest in climate-resilient agriculture: diverse farming systems, agroforestry, reservoirs to capture rainfall, to allow agricultural producers to withstand droughts. And each country must adopt a drought strategy that clearly defines which actions must be taken, by which authority, with which resources, in order to assist the communities affected.”

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food also emphasized that chronic malnutrition was the result not only of a lack of food, but also of bad feeding practices, poor healthcare, and lack of access to safe drinking water. In Niger in 2011, he noted, the harvests were at a historic high, but 900,000 children were still severely malnourished. “The right to food requires measures beyond agricultural policies: it should also guide the action of ministries of health and education, and leadership in adopting measures to avoid massive violations of this right should come from the highest level of Government”, he said. He emphasized however that the need for long-term, structural actions, should not be a pretext for not acting swiftly now.

END

* See report from Oxfam and Save the Children on the delayed response to the Horn of Africa crisis: https://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/dangerous-delay

Note to editors:

On a visit to Accra from 31 January to 3 February 2012, the Special Rapporteur will address the founding meeting of the West African Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition (WAAAHM) and co-chair the high-level policy dialogue between the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and farmers from West African citizens’ juries on agricultural research, convened by the International Institute for Environment and Development.

Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the UN Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.

The Special Rapporteur will present the “Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessments of Trade and Investment Agreements” to the 19th session
of the Human Rights Council (27 February to 23 March 2012):
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/19session/

For more information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, visit:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or http://www.srfood.org

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